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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
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PACOM FOR FPA HUSO
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TAGS: [PHUM PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KPAO TH](#)
SUBJECT: TELEVISION IN THAILAND: WHO HOLDS THE LEASH

REF: A. BKK 01549 - SHIN DEAL LEGAL SO WHAT?

- [1](#)B. BKK 00538 - TEMASEK BUYOUT OF SHIN CORP
- [1](#)C. BKK 01537 - OPPOSITION SELLS

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY. The RTG has traditionally maintained tight control over the information presented to the public over the airwaves. The RTG owns all of the country's six television licenses, although three are licenses to commercial operators. Reform of broadcast media, though mandated by the 1997 Constitution, has been exceedingly slow in materializing. Television professionals have practiced self-censorship under the all-too-real threat of reprisal for reporting anything overly critical of the government or powerful pro-government commercial interests. In recent weeks, we have seen a trend on the part of television news programs to move beyond self-censorship and present increasingly balanced coverage of the current political crisis. Still, it is far too early to tell whether this newfound freedom is here to stay. END SUMMARY.

WHO OWNS THE AIRWAVES...

[1](#)2. (SBU) The RTG maintains ownership over all of the country's six free-to-air television licenses. Three of these licenses are leased out to private companies but, as the owner, the RTG has the ability to weigh in with the management to ensure that they are not challenging government policies or leadership. Below is a list of Thai television channels and their respective ownership:

LICENSE	OWNER	Operator
Channel 3	MCOT	BEC-Tero
Channel 5	Thai Army	Thai Army
Channel 7	Thai Army	Bangkok TV
Channel 9	MCOT	MCOT
Channel 11	PRD	PRD
iTV	PM Office	Shin

...AND WHO RUNS THEM

[1](#)3. (SBU) The two long-standing commercial operators dominate Thailand's prime-time viewership: Bangkok Entertainment Company (BEC-Tero) operates Channel 3 and can expect five million viewers most nights; Bangkok TV Company runs Channel 7 which routinely draws over twelve million viewers. BEC-Tero, in turn, is owned by the Maleenot Family, and one of the Maleenot's is the Minister of Tourism in Prime Minister Thaksin's current Cabinet. Bangkok TV is owned by the Kanthasut Family, also owners of the Italo-Thai conglomerate, long-standing Thaksin supporters.

¶4. (SBU) Thailand's other independently-operated station is iTV, established in 1997, and has around four million viewers. It is operated by a subsidiary of the now infamous Shin Corporation (see REFs A and B), owned by the family of PM Thaksin Shinawatra until March 14 when it was purchased by Singapore's Temasek Holdings. iTV insiders have told PDoff that Grammy Entertainment, another close ally of the Prime Minister, is interested in purchasing iTV from Temasek, but to date there is no clear indication that such a sell-off is in the works.

¶5. (SBU) The rest of Thai TV is operated by its respective owners. Channel 9, which like iTV draws about four million views, is operated by MCOT (Mass Communication Organization of Thailand - a state-run enterprise that, although it is now issuing shares to the public, is still 77 percent owned by the Ministry of Finance). Channel 11, with about one million viewers, is directly operated by the Prime Minister's Public Relations Department, and Channel 5, with about two million viewers, is still very much run by the Army.

CENSORSHIP THAI-STYLE

¶6. (SBU) PDoff and POloff met with representatives from the six television stations to discuss a variety of issues including the role of the RTG in news programming decisions. Officials at Channel 5 and 11 made no bones about the fact that programming decisions are made by senior military and government officials in charge of the station. While managers at the other four stations maintained that there is no direct interference from the government in determining news content, all agreed that an unwritten understanding exists of what is and is not permissible.

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¶7. (SBU) Producers at all three commercial stations confirmed that self-imposed censorship is maintained by the tacit threat of reprisal. TV hosts and producers who dare to cross over the invisible line have routinely lost their airtime or faced exile to some forgotten corner of the newsroom. These producers speculated that powerful commercial interests with ties to the government influence programming decisions by threatening to pull advertisements and cut into revenues.

¶8. (SBU) One producer confirmed that stations occasionally receive phone calls and even letters from the PM's Public Relations Department suggesting that certain stories be dropped or treated softly. When the anti-Thaksin movement was principally led by Sondhi Limthongkul, the producer said a government official called his station to "encourage" them to play down the story. Several sources said that in the past they had been told by management to stop investigating a story that could damage commercial prospects of advertisers, such as reports of toxic contamination in instant noodles and shampoo.

REFORM ON THE SLOW TRACK

¶9. (U) The 1997 Constitution mandated broadcast media reform by calling for the reallocation of TV (and radio) frequencies to the public, private, and community sectors. It further mandated the establishment of an independent National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) to oversee this distribution and supervise the broadcast industry.

¶10. (SBU) Eight years later and implementation of these reforms is still pending. In September 2005, the Senate put forward a list of seven nominees for the NBC. Almost immediately, media advocates and professionals in the field questioned the nominees' independence, noting their close ties to the government, military or established entertainment industry. To date, the nominees have not been formally

appointed and, thus, the NBC has yet to be officially formed.

¶11. (SBU) At the same time, the draft constitutionally-mandated Radio and Television Broadcasting Bill continues to be mired in Parliament. An article stipulating that any technician, announcer or host must receive a license of operation from the RTG is one of the principle roadblocks. Critics claim that the article is a draconian measure designed to provide a governmental screening process for media professionals.

TESTING, TESTING, 1, 2, 3

¶12. (SBU) As the campaign to oust PM Thaksin continues to gain momentum, the Thai broadcast media has become increasingly bold in its coverage of the anti-government movement (see REF C). With the exception of Channel 11 (which is run out of the PM's office) all TV stations have made unprecedented efforts to cover anti-Thaksin activities. Media observers attribute this shift partly to a drive to increase ratings, and partly to the fact that the anti-Thaksin protests have simply gotten too big for the broadcast media to ignore.

THE TELEVISION MAY NOT BE REVOLUTIONIZED

¶13. (SBU) COMMENT. Two months ago, we would not have anticipated the remarkable shift that has occurred in televised news coverage. Despite the government's complete control of the broadcast media's licenses, journalists and talk show hosts continue to press the boundary -- offering coverage that recently would have been unthinkable. To date, the TV stations have not moved to crack down. In contrast, the only talk show hosts to be fired recently were two virulently pro-government commentators who were canned for making disparaging remarks about much revered Privy Council President Gen. Prem Tinsulanonda.

¶15. (SBU) Nevertheless, it is far too early to tell whether this move away from self-censorship will endure. So far, the media has been testing the waters on a single issue, the anti-Thaksin movement and the political crisis that it has generated. Admittedly, this is a huge story but it will eventually come to an end. And when it does, whatever government replaces the current caretaker administration will still own the airwaves.
BOYCE